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## "MARY CHRISTMAS"

(The Story of One Christmas in France in 1918)

BY MARY FLORENCE LAIRD, R.N.

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THE boys all called her "Mary Christmas" because she came to our hospital two days before Christmas, but they never knew how appropriately she had been named. The twenty-third had been such a blue day. It seemed as if the sun were never going to shine again. Our hospital was most unattractive. It did not even have the saving quality of cleanliness to show for all the labor which was being put into it daily. The chief nurse had only that morning come from the headquarters hospital with its marble stairs so easily cleaned to ours with its scuffed soft wooden ones, and she did not need to say a word—we all felt it, too! Then too, we were away from the rest of the hospital group and we thought that they were getting the best of everything because they had greens, more nurses than we had, a Red Cross worker full time, and many Red Cross supplies as well as a library.

On this particular December day it seemed to the charge nurse as if all she heard was: "Say, sister, just see if you c'n find out when the D-Classers are goin' ta git movin' long home, will ya?" and "Gee, it don't seem like it was Christmas thout no snow ner turkey ner m'own folks er—" Here he was interrupted by one on crutches: "Pile of a lot a kick yo got comin' when yo kin git daown fo mess aon yo both feet. Me en Baldy here has to swallow any ole slum they wants ta shoot up. Yo ought ta be good en glad yo kin rustle fer yer own grub. Dja think the nurse here caires ta hear yer ole maath-organ grindin aout nuthin but 'Home Sweet Home' all the time? Jest can it, Bo, en ye'll git thar sooner. Won't he, 'Lemon-pie'?" "Lemon-pie" waved his hand in assent. He was flat on his back and wasn't talking much these days since he had been put in D-Class. On that day, however, he had written home that he was a "D-Class patient" and was coming home soon. He asked his mother on receipt of his letter to begin making lemon pies and not to stop until he was there. So after a month he began to mourn lest some of the pies should spoil before he got home and from that time he was dubbed "Lemon-pie."

The nurse knew how badly "Crutches" felt over having to be waited on and how hard he was trying to smooth things out for everybody. How she did wish she could bring just a bit of Christmas cheer to all those fine boys. But she was only a nurse with a limited

staff and every moment had to be spent doing the necessary things for the patients—that is, necessary from the army standpoint, not the nurses'. She should have been cheered by "Timper's" postal from "St. Agony," to which five of them had been evacuated two weeks before, because he said, "Thought your ranch was drab, but, believe me, it is heaven compared to this mud hole. Tell the rest of the bunch to stay where they are. I'd walk back on my stumps if I could just get away." This letter had a very depressing effect on the nurse, instead of cheering her.

A nasty, cold, gray drizzle turned into a heavy rain the next day. The little stove in the linen room sizzled and belched forth puffs of smoke every time the door opened. The linen was returned from the laundry too wet to put away. The nurse was trying to shake it out on the edge of the shelves but was interrupted by the Mess Sergeant who looked like a funeral. "Sister, might as well have it over! The Mess Officer says we can't have turkey fer Christmas. He's sendin' ova a bunch a bunnies. Bunny-stew fer us. Ain't it tha limit?" He was evidently afraid the nurse was going to cry all over him, so he hustled out and banged the door after him. It opened again immediately. A light step sounded and the nurse looked up through a frown and a mist of tears to see a woman's figure in the Red Cross uniform outlined against the gray smoked wall. A husky voice said, "Are you the Charge Nurse? I'm 'Mary K.' I have been assigned to this hospital and I hope you'll keep me ever so busy. Guess we all want to forget we're away from home, do we not?" Her gracious smile included us all and from that minute we felt cheered. That afternoon a tree was sent over from Headquarters. In a twinkling groups of men were seated around the tables in the mess hall laughing and humming like a sewing society. Their fingers were fashioning bright colored bits of tissue paper into ornaments for the tree. Nuts were being covered with tin-foil and tied with thread. Gradually the tree was beginning to look like a real Christmas tree. Suddenly there was a whoop at the far end of the hall. A noisy shuffling, and Steinberg, a little Jew, was hoisted upon the shoulders of two giants to place a large cardboard star he had just finished on the tip of the tree. It was dusk. The tree was finished and the men were all lined up for mess. The line was broken by three patients who had been missing all afternoon. They came in with their arms loaded with mistletoe, just rollicking because they had been able to evade the M. P.'s (Military Police) all the afternoon in order to get this green for decorations.

Yes, it was Christmas Eve and "Mary Christmas" had worked a miracle in our hospital. It wasn't drab at all any more. It was seeth-

ing with life, for she had planned a programme in which everybody who could even breathe had a share. It started with Barker—Famous Mesmerist. The mess-hall was ringing with peal after peal of laughter, because little Allen, under the spell of Barker's eye, was plunging around madly to escape the ants which he thought were swarming over him. In the meantime, Williams was humped over on a wooden box in the linen room, feverishly sewing wads of cotton on a red outing flannel coat for Santa Claus to wear. He had overheard the Buddy who wanted snow, and snow he must have. Pat Sullivan, "Santa Claus," had almost spoiled the whole thing in his efforts to make Williams hurry. The box he sat on threatened to give way with every move, his thread played the queerest tricks on him, it knotted with every stitch. He was quite sure thread made in America wouldn't do that. The needle ran almost through his finger and his thimble jumped right into space. At last it was finished and Pat was pinned into it with many warnings. The Marine quartette was singing its world famous song, which was the last on the programme. It was followed by a deafening volume of clapping and pounding, whistling and shrieking, long continued.

Finally there was a calm and "Mary Christmas" announced "Santa Claus!" A white-faced lad lying on the table on a stretcher called out, "Three for 'Mary Christmas'." Again the noise was deafening and long continued. Surely she must have known how we all adored her. Her face was flaming as she held up her hand. It quieted down and Santa Claus—quite a worn-out old fellow, with a long beard and hair of finest absorbent cotton, and a bad limp—hopped out from behind the tree. On the way there he had lost his nice fat pillow of a stomach and with it had evidently gone his speech, for he hesitated and then in a high-pitched, quavering voice said, "Hello, doughboys." A moment of silence and then bedlam broke loose, for most of the so-called "Doughboys" were Marines! Santa Claus swayed a moment and saved his little Irish life by bowing grandly and continuing, "Marines, nurses and everybody." This broke the tension and a big laugh filled the hall as Santa Claus went about his official business of distributing the gifts of the Americans at home to the Americans in France.

Later, after everybody had been served cocoa and cookies and most of the patients had hobbled—munching from the contents of their socks—to their respective floors to talk it over with their "Bunkies," a group gathered around the piano where a clear tenor was singing with sweetness and fervor: "Silent Night; Holy Night," and not another sound was heard. "Mary Christmas" rushed into the linen room to hide her tears and be alone, but she bumped into

the nurse, peeling Pat Sullivan out of his Santa coat and ordering him to bed because he had a temperature.

The door closed on Pat and left the two women alone. The nurse was weeping softly because "Poor old Sharp is going to die and he has not heard one word from home for ever seven months; and Brown, the Mess Sergeant, has had a cable from home that his wife just died of flu and he is sitting in the basement staring into space. Tomorrow he has to make that awful rabbit stew, too. And just as the party was going full swing didn't Long have to be brought in raving drunk by two severe M. P.'s? I got that pass for him because he promised me he wouldn't drink another drop ever. And now he can only get drunk once more before he is put in the 'Brig'." The nurse looked up at the chuckling, but she found tears streaming down "Mary's" face. "You see, I've been here since 1914 and I know just how dreadful it all is. I was here studying music. I have spent all of my life perfecting my voice and was to have 'come out' in 1915. But when the war came, like the rest, I volunteered to serve wherever I was most needed. It fell to my lot to go to Northern France with a surgeon and, due to exposure, I had a severe attack of laryngitis. My singing voice is gone and you see how husky and uncertain my speaking voice is. I have stayed here because I thought my knowledge of French might help and I want to wear out, and not rust out." This last came with a sob. The nurse patted her hand and slipped back to Sharp, thinking as she went that it was no wonder this loving, gracious woman, so sincere and understanding, had been able to bring to us all the real spirit of Christmas so that we had instinctively called her "Mary Christmas."

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## RED CROSS HOME NURSING CLASSES AS DEVELOPED IN DELAWARE

BY MARY A. MORAN, R.N.

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AT this time as many chapters are developing the Red Cross Instruction Department as a public health measure and to aid in the shortage of nurses, possibly an account of the work done in the instruction department of the Delaware State Chapter might help nurses employed in other chapters. The writer took charge of the Teaching Center in February, 1918. It had been opened six months prior to this but had not developed to any great extent. At this time there was a fair amount of equipment, but not sufficient to do effective work and after four years' experience in this work, I still feel